

BOOK REVIEW: A TOPOGRAPHY PLAGUED BY MARGINALITY IN VICTORIAN NOVELS

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The building of spaces based on the stereotypical gender roles was widely discussed in many Victorian novels. Other concepts frequently used in the 19th-century novels are those of ‘marginality’ and ‘Otherness’ which are illustrated by Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu through the marginalized individuals who strive to climb the social ladder or to preserve the newly acquired social status. We read this survey because it mainly focuses on women who seem to be enclosed in marginal positions and because it differentiates the perspective of a male author from the one of a female writer. The author, however, tries to emphasize the marginality of different individuals from different social classes, regardless of their race or gender. In her book, *A Topography Plagued by Marginality in Victorian Novels* (2022), Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu lets herself be guided by the existentialist mantra “essence precedes existence” which Simone de Beauvoir transformed into a feminist phrase: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (*The Second Sex*, 1998, p. 267) suggesting that gendered stereotypes influenced the construction of spaces and of conventional norms which is an idea generally transmitted to readers in order for them to follow a specific set of values.

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As the title suggests, Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu referred only to Victorian texts, to illustrate and even re-interpret the traditional roles, the moral values specific to those times: the chronological order mirrors the evolution of concepts such as ‘marginality’, ‘Otherness’ and ‘centre’ in time and history. The survey begins with *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë published in 1847, it then continues with *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (1848), *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell (1860), *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens (1861), *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865), and it ends with the analysis of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy from 1890. Besides depicting the protagonists’ marginality, each chapter of the book reminds us of the well-known ‘master-slave’ dialectic (Hegel, 1995, p. 67) which focuses on the characters’ position in society and their possible oscillation between centre and margins. Other binary oppositions also mentioned and explained in the introduction of the book are private vs. public, nature vs. culture, surface vs. depth, appearance vs. reality, man vs. woman, hunters vs. hunted, free vs. confined, possessors vs. possessed. Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu considers these concepts as lying at the core of most discussions about space and social position in the Victorian novels.

“Marginality Embedded in Opposite Spaces” is the first chapter of the book, which offers the characters’ representation in opposite spaces in *Wuthering Heights*. The difference between Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights reflects the opposition between nature and culture, which also mirrors the basic features of the inhabitants of these two spaces: the Lintons and the Earnshaws, respectively. The prototype of marginality is Heathcliff whose name and appearance illustrate his social position, education, and origin. The education and culture of Thrushcross Grange, as well as the savageness of Wuthering Heights are analysed in the examples taken from Emily Brontë’s novel which emphasize the influence that spaces have on their inhabitants. Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu provides the readers with the portrait of the Victorian patriarch and shows how his power (sometimes manifested through violence) modifies spaces and the persons within. The violence exercised upon certain characters reinforces Hegel’s dialectic (mastery vs. servitude) in which one has the right to impose orders and to control others, giving the slave enough reasons to rebel against or subvert the master attempting to steal his position in society.

“Can Governesses Break Marginality without Being Punished?” refers to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* whose protagonist’s marginalization is caused by her condition as an orphan. The second chapter of this book shows Jane in different stages of her life and her rebellion against her abusers who considered themselves socially superior to her. Each space defines a stage in Jane’s life: Gateshead (Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu identifies this space as the beginning of Jane’s marginality), Lowood School (representing the transition from a private to a more public existence), Thornfield (Jane’s marginalisation encloses her into a web of lies), Marsh End (this space marks the end of her marginality),

and Ferndean (which symbolizes the balance between reason and passion, and the move towards the centre of the social system). The woman's marginality is marked by different acts of oppression, of humiliation, of (physical and verbal) abuse, which she had to endure first as an orphan, then as a governess – ultimately as 'the Other'.

"Overcoming Marginality in *North and South* and the Transgression of Borders" illustrates the relation between the urban and the rural landscape in the 19th century England, between the industrial North and the idyllic South. The third chapter of this book reveals Elizabeth Gaskell's insight into the woman's forced transgression from a superior social class to an inferior one, and vice versa, as well as into the effects of the industrial revolution. Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu considers Margaret Hale's discourse in the novel not a feminist manifesto, but a woman's right to voice her opinions in order to solve social problems. This is a novel in which the public space invaded the private home, in which social aspects pervade Thornton's domestic space, thus social life influences the personality of characters and alters the identity of spaces. The South is continuously idealised, despite its passivity, whereas the industrial North's lack of beauty and menacing darkness torments the nostalgic characters and pushes them into marginal positions. However, a woman manages to overcome her marginality through education, kindness, and generosity, only after she has acquired the necessary lessons of humility and modesty.

"Forever Marginal despite Transgressing the Childhood Rural Boundaries" highlights Pip's marginalization in different stages of his life or in different spaces in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Again, the orphan is 'the Other'; despite his gender, the orphan has to belong to the lower-class. Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu re-evaluates the Victorian binary oppositions when she classifies the Dickensian spaces into outer and interior, rural and urban, uncivilized and civilized, infinite and finite spaces. The bildungsroman presents Pip's evolution from childhood to youth, his transgression from innocence to maturity, as well as his overcoming of his marginality. When he leaves behind the rural environment for London, he passes through 'sub-spaces' like the hulks (the prison-ships), the river Thames, the sea. These peripheral spaces underline that the water represents the border between criminality and Victorian educated people. The protagonist's marginality makes it easier for others to lie to him (hence the secrecy of his benefactor), to abuse him (hence his sister's abuses) – all these reveal the dehumanization of the individual in a corrupt society. Again, the Victorian binary oppositions are detected when the author gives examples of manipulators and manipulated, between hunters and hunted, as well as between possessor and possessed. This chapter calls the reader's attention to the difference between male and female writers: the Brontë Sisters and Elizabeth Gaskell build up their protagonists as capable of overcoming their marginality only after they have learnt the necessary lessons of domesticity, while Charles

Dickens imagines the hero's transgression of marginality with humility and only after he has understood the rightful Victorian order.

"When Time and Space become Strange: Does the Wonderworld Help Alice Overcome Her Marginality?" is Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu's attempt to show how a male author (Lewis Carroll) depicts a female protagonist, how he depicts her rebellion against the Victorian conventions and how Alice deals with her marginality in Wonderland as well as in the Victorian reality. In the second half of the 19th century, we sense an evolution in the process of constructing a woman's identity when Lewis Carroll creates the heroine as capable of rejoicing adventures, of experiencing a fantasy world. Although she is not an orphan, Alice is seen as 'the Other' because she is a child, hence Alice's marginalization and rejection from both the Victorian reality and from Wonderland. Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu perceives Alice's transgression of her marginality as a conflict between the girl's past and her present, between horizontality (the Victorian society) and verticality (Wonderland). Besides the typical spaces like the rabbit hole (presented as a portal between Victorian reality and Wonderland) to the Queen's Garden (reminding us of the primordial temptation and a glimpse into the Garden of Eden), Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu also discusses the girl's bodily borders which are constantly challenged through her adventures in Wonderland, and which make Alice feel confused about her identity. The more elements from the Victorian reality are neutralized by those specific to Wonderland, the more we feel the reversal of the typical hierarchy which challenges the traditional ideas of domesticity and stability especially in the episodes involving the Duchess or the Queen of Hearts. We tend to believe that Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu sees Lewis Carroll (the male author) as someone who manipulates the female character to believe that any world (she intends to evade to) could turn out to be a dystopia because this fantastic world is ruled by a totalitarian dictatorship.

"Mapping Tess of the D'Urbervilles' Marginality", the final chapter of this book, opposes the traditional morality to the Victorian values and foregrounds once again the woman's marginalization because Tess is Thomas Hardy's Other, the outsider who is not understood or helped by the rest of the characters, hence her alienation. Tess' oscillation between the centre and the margins of the social system mirrors other Victorian binary oppositions: private-public, master-slave, nature-culture. However, these concepts are re-interpreted by Hardy because he prefers to accentuate the heroine's close connection to nature and her enclosure in prehistoric and medieval elements, thus the male writer combines spatial with temporal coordinates.

We find the book to be the expression of Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu's own thoughts about marginality, about gender roles, about the Victorian values. The book with its comparative analysis of the six novels can be used by both scholars

interested in Victorian literature/culture and students studying the 19th century literature since it offers a comprehensive analysis of Victorian novels which can be applied to other narratives written in the same period. Cătălina Bălinișteanu-Furdu does not intend to question the gender roles and stereotypes; she aims at underlining the importance of power, of order and of stability in a period of time when society was undergoing tremendous political, scientific and social changes.

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